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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, DRL/IRF(BARNES)

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: IRF report: Draft 2003 Maldives submission

Refs: (A) State 194330

- (B) Colombo-IRF 05/23/03 class email

1. (U) This message is Sensitive but Unclassified -- Please handle accordingly.

2. (SBU) Per the request in Ref A, Mission submits the draft 2003 International Religious Freedom report for the Maldives. As also requested in Ref A, a Word document with tracked changes based on the 2002 report has already been forwarded to the Department (see Ref B).

3. (SBU) The draft 2003 Maldivian IRF report follows:

Begin text:

#### MALDIVES

The 1997 constitution designates Islam as the official state religion and the practice of other religions is prohibited by law. Foreigners are allowed to practice their religion only if they do so in private and do not encourage Maldivian citizens to participate.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and freedom of religion remains severely restricted. The president is the "supreme authority to propagate the tenets of Islam." The government observes Shari'a (Islamic law), and severely restricts the practice of other faiths.

Citizens regard Islam as one of their society's most distinctive characteristics and believe that it promotes harmony and national identity.

The U.S. Government does not maintain a resident Embassy in the Maldives; the U.S. Ambassador in Colombo, Sri Lanka, is also accredited to the government in Male. The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

#### SECTION I. RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

The Maldives is an archipelago consisting of approximately 1,200 coral atolls and islands scattered over 500 miles in the Indian Ocean southeast from India, and its population is approximately 280,000.

It is believed that the entire indigenous population is Muslim, the majority of which adhere to the Sunni branch of Islam. Foreigners in the Maldives -- more than 300,000 tourists annually (predominantly Europeans and Japanese) and about 20,000 foreign workers (predominantly Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Indian, and Bangladeshi) -- are allowed to practice their religion privately only.

#### SECTION II. STATUS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Freedom of religion is restricted significantly. The 1997 constitution designates Islam as the official state religion, and the government interprets this provision to impose a requirement that citizens be Muslims.

Foreign residents are allowed to practice their religion, if they do so privately, and can not encourage Maldivian citizens to participate.

#### - Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In July 2000, the president stated that no other religion will be allowed in the country, and the Home Affairs Ministry announced special programs to safeguard and strengthen religious unity. The government has established a Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs to provide guidance on religious matters. The government also has set standards for individuals who conduct Friday services at mosques to ensure adequate theological qualifications.

The president must be a Sunni Muslim and under the constitution is the ``supreme authority to propagate the tenets of Islam.'' Cabinet ministers also are required to be Sunni Muslims. Members of the People's Majlis (Parliament) must be Muslim. The government observes Shari'a (Islamic law).

There are no places of worship for adherents of other religions. The government prohibits the importation of icons and religious statues but generally permits the importation of religious tracts, such as Bibles, for personal use.

The government prohibits non-Muslim clergy and missionaries from proselytizing and conducting public worship services. Conversion of a Muslim to another faith is a violation of Shari'a and may result in a loss of the convert's citizenship.

Islamic instruction is a mandatory part of the school curriculum, and the government funds the salaries of instructors of Islam.

#### - Abuses of Religious Freedom

The law severely restricts a citizen's right to freedom of expression in order to protect ``the basic tenets of Islam.''

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners during the period covered by this report.

#### - Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

### SECTION III. SOCIETAL ATTITUDES

Most citizens regard Islam as one of their society's most distinctive characteristics and believe that it promotes harmony and national identity.

### SECTION IV. U.S. GOVERNMENT POLICY

The U.S. Government does not maintain a resident embassy in the Maldives; the U.S. Ambassador in Colombo, Sri Lanka also is accredited to the government in Male. The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

End text.

14. (SBU) Mission confirms the statement in Section II of the above draft that there are no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

ENTWISTLE